

C'RON MISSES PENALTY Stalemate at Nou Camp

REUTERS, Barcelona

Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo fluffed an early penalty as his side drew 0-0 with a dominant Barcelona in the first leg of their Champions League semifinal at the Nou Camp on Wednesday.

The Portugal international, who has scored 38 goals in all competitions this season, sent his spot kick high and wide after Barca centre-back Gabriel Milito handled the ball in the area with just over a minute on the clock.

"I didn't change my style on the penalty, today I didn't score but no problem -- I will score in Manchester," Ronaldo told Sky Sports. "Nil-nil away is a good result."

United appeared stunned and surrendered the initiative to Barca but although the Catalans dominated they failed to take advantage and visiting goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar was only seriously tested by substitute Thierry Henry late in the game.

Barca, the only non-English side in the semis, have been poor in the league but gave a far more impressive performance against an out-of-sorts United and will feel short-changed by a result that leaves the

tie delicately balanced before next week's return at Old Trafford.

United seemed to have got off to a dream start when Milito conceded a penalty in the second minute, handling the ball after Ronaldo had beaten him to a header in the area.

But the normally super cool Portuguese completely missed the target, sending the ball past Victor Valdes's left post after he tried to chip it into the top corner.

The crowd exploded with delight at the winger's error, while United seemed to be in shock at their team mate's miss.

Barca took advantage of the confusion in the United ranks to put the visitors under heavy pressure with Deco driving forward from midfield and providing some good service for attacking trio Lionel Messi, Andres Iniesta and Samuel Eto'o.

United barely got a sniff off the ball as Deco and Yaya Toure bossed the midfield and when they did get possession they looked nervous and surrendered the ball almost immediately.

But the visitors did cause Barca another scare on the half-hour when Ronaldo went down in the area as he tussled with Rafael Marquez after Iniesta misjudged a pass to the Mexican.

Barca continued to dominate but did not seriously challenge Van

der Sar until the United goalkeeper tipped a long-range shot from right back Gianluca Zambrotta over the bar.

Messi and Iniesta sliced open United's defence with a gleaming one-touch passing move that left the ball in the path of Samuel Eto'o but the Cameroon striker hit the side netting.

Messi, making his first start since returning from a thigh injury, ran out of steam in the second half and Barca coach Frank Rijkaard sent on youngster Bojan Krkic and then Henry.

The Frenchman almost broke the deadlock with a rasping drive seven minutes from time but Van der Sar beat the shot clear and then stopped a free kick by the former Arsenal player to ensure the game finished in a stalemate.

"We created more chances than Barcelona, and we feel very confident, played well, defended well, we play at home now and have a great chance," added Ronaldo.

Barca centre-back Marquez will miss the second leg after picking up a booking for a foul on the Portugal winger.

The winner of the tie will play Liverpool or Chelsea in the final in Moscow on May 21. The two Premier League sides drew 1-1 at Anfield in their first leg match on Tuesday.



Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo (L) skips a tackle from Barcelona defender Gabriel Milito during their Champions League semifinal at the Nou Camp on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Gerrard backs Torres

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard has backed striker Fernando Torres to help end the side's poor record at Stamford Bridge and get the result they need against English rivals Chelsea that will see the Reds into next month's Champions League final.

In Rafael Benitez's four seasons as Liverpool manager the team have not even scored a goal at Chelsea's west London home ground.

But England midfielder Gerrard hit back by saying: "We haven't gone there with Torres in our side before."

Liverpool must score at Stamford Bridge on Wednesday if they are to have a chance of reaching their third Champions League final in four years after Tuesday's 1-1 semifinal first-leg draw at Anfield otherwise they will go out on the

away goals rule.

Their best results at Stamford Bridge under Benitez are two goalless Champions League draws and a similar scoreless Premier League stalemate earlier this season.

What made the Anfield draw all the worse for Liverpool was that they were leading and just seconds away from victory when substitute John Arne Riise put through his own net in the 95th minute.

The scale of Liverpool's task is emphasised by the fact Chelsea haven't lost at home since Barcelona, their potential opponents in the Champions League final in Moscow on May 21, won 2-1 there in February 2006.

But Gerrard said: "We have the players and the belief. We've done it so many times, this team never knows when it is beaten."

"We may not have scored or won at Chelsea in four years, but we haven't been there with Fernando in the team before."

Even the two games there this season, the league draw and the

League Cup defeat, Fernando wasn't playing."

Torres, who has scored 30 goals this season, was well-marked on Tuesday by Chelsea captain John Terry, with Dutchman Dirk Kuyt opening the scoring for Liverpool.

Gerrard, though, added: "Chelsea know they will be in for a tough time next week, there may be a little more space for Fernando, and I don't hear any of their players thinking it's all over."

"Torres can cause any defence problems. You saw that in the first leg. He was very disappointed not to score."

"We've been to Inter Milan and Arsenal in this season's run and scored. So I can't see why we cannot score at Stamford Bridge."

"We believe we can beat Chelsea on their own patch. I am happy for people to say Chelsea are favourites, it's not important. We just have to block it out."

"We created the better chances at Anfield and I don't recall Pepe Reina having anything to do except pick the ball out of the net."

Maradona involved in a scuffle

AP, Buenos Aires

Former soccer star Diego Maradona threw a wild punch and some insults at a crush of television reporters who crowded him Wednesday as he left a courthouse following an arbitration hearing with his former manager.

Maradona and Guillermo Coppola, who have been enmeshed in a legal dispute over past business dealings, were summoned to appear at a hearing. But chaos ensued when Maradona left and local photographers and journalists chased him.

Live television showed Maradona and his former wife, Claudia Villafane, as they tried to escape through a crowd of journalists. Maradona was heard to shout: "Don't push Claudia."

With camera crews and reporters surrounding him, Maradona was seen throwing a punch that apparently missed. There were no reports of injuries, but Maradona can be heard on video complaining: "They hit me with a camera!"

Aurelio out for season

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool defender Fabio Aurelio is likely to miss the rest of the season after the Brazilian was ruled out for at least three weeks with a torn abductor muscle.

Aurelio was stretched off in the second half of Tuesday's Champions League semifinal against Chelsea following a collision with Joe Cole.

Reds boss Rafa Benitez confirmed Aurelio has little chance of returning to action this season, even if Liverpool reach the Champions League final on May 21.

"I have been talking with the doctor and with this kind of injury it usually takes a minimum of three weeks for the player to recover so it will be very difficult for Fabio to play again this season," Benitez said.

"It is very disappointing because Fabio has been doing a good job for the team."

Rosicky's injury improving

AFP, Prague

The Czech Republic's injured captain Tomas Rosicky announced Wednesday an improvement to the knee problem which has cast a major doubt over his Euro 2008 participation.

"My injury has improved a bit but I must still undergo rehabilitation," the Arsenal midfielder said on his website.

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Fergie warns Barca

AFP, Barcelona

Sir Alex Ferguson has warned Barcelona to brace themselves for an Old Trafford backlash when the two sides resume battle next week.

An enthralling goalless draw here on Wednesday has left the Champions League semifinal between the two clubs delicately poised but Ferguson is confident there will be no repeat of what was a subdued display by his team here on Wednesday evening.

United struggled to contain their hosts for long periods but the bluntness of Barcelona's cutting edge minimised the damage and the evening might have had a very different complexion if Cristiano Ronaldo had managed to convert a third minute penalty.

Given the cacophony of Catalan catcalls that provided the backdrop to his spot-kick, it was not surprising that Ronaldo suffered a rare failure of nerve, sidefooting his strike wide of Victor Valdes's left-hand post.

But Ferguson is confident that the Portuguese winger and his teammates can make amends next Tuesday and secure their place in next month's final in Moscow.

"I think that the game now starts at Old Trafford," said the Scot. "The situation is that if it is a scoring draw we are out and if we lose we are out."

"The big bonus is if we win we are through and it will be a different

game at Old Trafford. With our record there, the atmosphere and with our fans behind us, we have a very good chance to go through."

"It was significant that the Barcelona supporters were happy with the performance of their team. There were no white hankies and the support was terrific for them. Hopefully we will have the same kind of support in our own ground on Tuesday."

Ferguson played down the significance of Barcelona's territorial domination of Wednesday's match, stressing that a defence missing centreback Nemanja Vidic through illness had restricted the Catalans to one clear chance - which Samuel Eto'o blasted into the side netting in the 50th minute.

"Barcelona have a lot of possession in a lot of games. They tend to have in the Nou Camp so we are satisfied we kept a clean sheet. It was a professional performance to do that."

Ferguson admitted that United's ball retention and their exploitation of chances to counter-attack could have been better on the night but argued that had been offset by the performance of a back four impressively marshalled by Rio Ferdinand.

"After half time they had a little spell where Eto'o had a good chance - other than that I think we have done well in reducing their opportunities," the United manager added.

Ferguson revealed that Vidic, who was hospitalised on the eve of the match with a stomach infection, was unlikely to feature in

Saturday's Premier League clash with Chelsea, a match which could see United clinch the domestic title, and could also be doubtful for the second leg with Barcelona.

"We don't know exactly what type of infection it is," Ferguson admitted. "We will give him every chance but we don't think he will be ready for Saturday."

Barca coach Frank Rijkaard echoed Ferguson's suggestion that the tie remains wide open.

"The penalty miss was a decisive moment for us," acknowledged the Dutchman. "It was a bit of a wake-up call and after that we played well."

Barca's lively display was well received by a Nou Camp crowd that has been severely critical of Rijkaard and his players as a result of their poor form in La Liga this season.

"In pure football terms it was not our best performance, but the team transmitted something special to the crowd and it was a great atmosphere," Rijkaard said.

"It was a very tactical game, Manchester played well on the counter attack but did not give them any chances and they know we are capable of scoring at Old Trafford."

"It will not be easy, we are up against a very good team but if we concentrate and remain positive, we know we can do it. A goalless draw is not the best result and we have to score over there, but it is not going to be easy for them. We will have our chances."

Own goal devastates Riise

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool defender John Arne Riise has revealed his misery at the own goal which threatens to derail his side's Champions League challenge.

Riise is still coming to terms with the impact of his blunder after he headed into his own net in the last minute of stoppage time to gift Chelsea a 1-1 draw in the semifinal first leg at Anfield.

Rafa Benitez's side face a mammoth task to reach the final now but Riise is determined to help the Reds bounce back at Stamford Bridge next Wednesday.

"What can I say? I'm ashamed and devastated. Sometimes you experience these things and for defenders it happens from time to time. Now it has happened to me," he said.

"I know how strong I am mentally, and what really matters is how you recover. I've experienced tougher things and I know I will learn from this."

"I'm disappointed, but I won't go around and hang my head. I have to use this as something positive."

The Norway left-back, who also scored an own goal against Luton in the FA Cup this season, was so down he didn't even speak to his brother in the aftermath of Tuesday's match.

Bjorn Helge Riise, who plays for Lillestrom, said: "I tried getting in

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Aussies make winning start

AFP, Perth

Defending Olympic champions Australia battled back from a first-half deficit to beat China 2-1 in the opening round of the four-nations field hockey tournament here on Wednesday.

The Australians fell behind after Chinese striker Hu Hui Ren converted a penalty corner in the 24th minute.

But the home side knuckled down with a dominant second-half performance to overcome the 17th-ranked Chinese with a 62nd-minute penalty corner conversion from Grant Schubert and a field goal three minutes later from 2007 world player of the year Jamie Dwyer.

"There was obviously a huge difference in our play during the second half," Australian coach Barry Dancers said.

"In particular our intensity lifted in the second half as did our pressure when they had the ball as we were far too passive in the first half."

In the earlier match, South Korea downed India 4-1.

Nadal reaches quarters

Tennis

AFP, Monte Carlo

Triple champion Rafael Nadal moved closer to a historic fourth consecutive Monte Carlo Masters title on Thursday when he beat Spanish compatriot Juan Carlos Ferrero 6-4, 6-1 to book a quarterfinal place.

Nadal recorded his sixth career win over Ferrero and will now face another Spaniard, fifth seed David Ferrer, for a place in the semifinals.

The 21-year-old Nadal took his record at the Monte Carlo Country Club to 21 wins in 22 matches with his only defeat coming against Argentina's Guillermo Coria in the third round back in 2003.

His title last year took him level with Ilie Nastase's three consecutive wins from 1971-1973.

The triple French Open champion broke in the fourth game of the first set to lead 3-1 before the gritty 13th seeded Ferrero, twice a champion in 2002 and 2003, hit back in the seventh game.

But Nadal wrapped up the opener with a vicious, deep forehand on his fourth set point.

Nadal was ahead at 2-0 in the second set with a punishing forehand return of a weak Ferrero second service and that soon became 4-0 with a sweet drop shot.

The duo then exchanged breaks which left Nadal with a 5-1 lead which was converted into victory courtesy of a smooth forehand pass.

Ferrer, who clinched his sixth career title in Valencia last weekend, reached his fourth successive Monte Carlo quarterfinal by brushing aside Serbia's Janko Tipsarevic 6-4, 6-0.

Ferrer's compatriot Nicolas Pietrangeli was unable to join him in the last eight when he lost a marathon third round encounter to Russia's Igor Andreev.

Andreev won 7-5, 4-6, 6-4 but needed seven match points to secure his first place in the last eight and end the hopes of Almagro, one of the form players on clay this year.



Russian tennis star Maria Sharapova blows the candles on the cake during her 21st birthday party at an exclusive club in New York on Wednesday.

PHOTO: INTERNET